

Baucus requests study for Libby trust fund

Senator searches for permanent funding for Libby residents with asbestos-related diseases

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., announced July 26 that he has begun investigating ways to create a 'white lung trust fund' to help pay long-term health costs for Libby residents who suffer from asbestos-related diseases as a result of the asbestos mine that W.R. Grace operated for decades near the town.

In a letter to Daniel P. Mulhollan, Director of the Congressional Research Service, Baucus requested information about developing a trust fund for Libby that would be modeled after the Black Lung Trust Fund, which provides monthly payments and medical treatment for workers who have become ill as a result of working in coal mines.

"The city of Libby, Montana, is suffering an epidemic of unimaginable proportions," Mr. Baucus said in his letter to Mr. Mulhollan. "A vermiculite mine in the area, which is owned by W.R. Grace who was a predominant employer, has poisoned the community with tremolite asbestos. In my pursuit to find a long-term healthcare solution for

Libby's residents, it has become obvious that there are many parallels between this situation and the situation that led to the creation of the Black Lung Trust Fund."

Libby residents have been exposed to asbestos since 1963, when W.R. Grace purchased and began operating the Libby vermiculite mine. [Editor's note: Libby residents have been exposed to vermiculite since the mine opened in the 1920s. W.R. Grace & Co. bought the mine in 1963 from Zonolite Co.] Reports estimate that up to 200 residents have died and hundreds more have become sick from asbestos-related diseases. At its peak, the now-defunct W.R. Grace mine in Libby produced about 80 percent of the world's supply of vermiculite, which is one of the most hazardous sources of asbestos.

Baucus said in his letter that a white lung trust fund could benefit individuals who have become ill from workplace asbestos-related diseases not only in Libby, but across the country.



Sen. Max Baucus

"I intend to use the information to explore the possibility of creating a new trust fund that would apply to people who have been exposed to tremolite asbestos and have long-term medical needs," Mr. Baucus said. "As Libby is not the only community to have faced this horrible problem, it is appropriate

to provide in the analysis a discussion of other states that could be included."

Mr. Baucus has played a large role in helping Libby residents who are suffering because of the Grace mine. Earlier this year, he called a hearing in a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to verify that cleanup activities in Libby are moving forward.

"The hearing was a good step toward raising the urgency of the situation in Libby to a national level and ensuring that the EPA will continue its work to clean up the town," Mr. Baucus said. "During the hearing, I secured a commitment from the EPA that the agency will continue its strong commitment to Libby. I also secured a commitment from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the public health counterpart to the EPA, to complete a long-term health plan for Libby by mid-summer 2002. Providing the town with a clean bill of health is one of the most important things

we can do."

Marianne Horinko, assistant administrator of EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, testified at the Senate hearing. During the hearing, Baucus extended an invitation to the administrator to tour Libby in order to fully understand the seriousness of the situation. Ms. Horinko accepted the invitation and was in Libby last Tuesday, July 23.

"I will continue to work closely with the EPA and our Libby residents," Mr. Baucus said. "It's important for EPA decision makers to visit Libby to truly understand the urgency. I'll make sure that the EPA is moving forward as quickly as possible in removing asbestos insulation from Libby homes and I'll continue to explore funding options for on-going health care for Libby. I'm eager to hear back from the Congressional Research Service on the possibility of creating a white lung trust fund to care for Libby folks for the long haul."

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